International Assistance for All in Syria: Going Local, Small and Incremental

RECOMMENDATIONS ON AID DELIVERY IN SYRIA

Introduction

Concerned by the vast manipulation, politicisation and diversion of international aid during the decade-long conflict in Syria, and the risk this poses for future recovery and reconstruction, the Syria Resource Group proposed that international donor interventions should be guided by a human rights-based conditionality rather than one tied to the political transition. The Group's discussion paper, *International Assistance for All in Syria* (2020), suggests that the international community tailor aid to Syria's multi-faceted reality, avoid using compromised channels of assistance delivery, work on a small and local level, use trusted Syrian intermediaries, monitor thoroughly and reactivate the role of the private sector.

This policy paper outlines how a local, small and incremental approach could be translated into practice. The proposed approach is guided by recommendations from the Syria Resource Group, which consulted with a number of Syrian experts, civil society leaders and members of the international community. Other aspects of the human-rights based aid approach are discussed in separate but complementary papers.[1]

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1. Other policy papers include *International Assistance for All in Syria: Using Trusted Syrian Intermediaries* and *International Assistance for All in Syria: Choosing the Right Channels*.

Why local, small and incremental?

When it comes to international assistance in Syria's extremely restricted aid environment, ensuring a human rights-based conditionality has proven difficult.[2] The country's fragmented geopolitical context and the absence of legitimate and uncompromised partners in central and regional authorities further complicates this reality. A localised approach would allow for incrementalism, while working on a small scale would offer a feasible alternative to current models of aid delivery. **Going local, small and incremental can be an effective way of bypassing the channels of aid delivery that have been compromised over the past 10 years** as both the central government and de-facto authorities in different regions have chiefly served their own interests rather than the population's needs.

A small-scale and localised approach enables conditions that reduce discrimination in aid delivery for all communities. It ensures more efficiency in aid delivery, as it directs interventions to where they are most needed. This approach reduces the risk of large-scale corruption and misconduct, delivering a higher impact and better value for money. It also aids the process of incrementally re-establishing trusted social and institutional channels through which assistance can be delivered at scale. Finally, it provides leverage and convening power to civil society actors, enabling aid to play a greater role in sustainable peacebuilding and recovery in Syria.

It is important to note that the local approach does not prescribe a specific degree of localisation. Rather, it entails **working at the most convenient local level – whether that be a neighbourhood, town or region – where a human rights-based conditionality can be effectively applied and monitored**. It also means maximising the use of local resources, both human and economic. In a localised context, communities can leverage their unique knowledge to take on advisory, mapping, vetting or monitoring roles and participate in decision-making processes, where trust and community representation are critical.

At the same time, a **focus on local and small interventions should not jeopardise national and subnational interests or prospects for recovery, peace and sustainability**. As such, it is crucial that incrementalism guide the scaling up of interventions when possible and as far as a human rights-based conditionality allows.

A localised approach also presents multiple challenges. The international aid system lacks official channels for delivering rights-based humanitarian and developmental aid at the local level. High management costs, difficulty in ensuring donor expectations of transparency and accountability, and the complication of restrictive measures that limit Syrian organisations' access to the international financial system are just some of the challenges that small-scale interventions must overcome. The risks of entrenching fragmentations and compromising state building likewise should not be overlooked. Nonetheless, these challenges can – and must – be addressed through creative solutions.

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2.   The Group uses the term "human rights-based conditionality" to refer to a proposed requirement that international aid in Syria promote and protect human rights and foster conditions for sustainable peace.

Conventional methods of delivering aid have thus far failed the Syrian people, strengthened war opportunists and contributed to serious human rights violations.

Thinking outside the box

In Syria, the most pressing challenge in going local, small and incremental is that aid delivery is confined to two types of channels: humanitarian channels, which do not admit conditionalities out of fear of compromising humanitarian principles; and development channels, which are mostly structured to bring bilateral assistance to central governments and support large-scale projects. The international aid system has yet to acknowledge the need for channels that account for the protracted nature of the Syrian conflict, and by now it needs to move beyond the binary of humanitarian/development aid. Considering the high risk of aid politicisation, it also needs to allow aid to bypass central authorities, especially compromised ones, and be managed locally.

The humanitarian-development-peace nexus approach has the potential to improve aid delivery in this context. It has already been incorporated into the European Union's and other donors' policy frameworks, which facilitates its application in Syrian response strategies. This approach allows for structural issues to be addressed through rights-based frameworks by adopting transformative modalities of work that place greater focus on localisation – as in strengthening the entire local response system – mainly through area-based and thematic programming.

Genuine localisation, however, is a substantial bureaucratic and financial undertaking and implies higher management and security costs and risks. This helps to explain donors' hesitancy to adopt this approach. Using trusted Syrian intermediaries can nevertheless be a viable solution, as it reduces the bureaucratic burden for donors, strengthens the capacities of local actors and ultimately grants better security on both ends. While the restrictive international financial system remains an obstacle in a heavily sanctioned environment such as Syria's, intermediaries can play a significant role in going small and local, especially in the form of uncompromised private sector actors given their dynamic and well-established role in Syria's economic development.

A localised approach does carry the additional risk of entrenching divisions and fragmentation, jeopardising interrelated subnational interests and diluting national development strategies. To mitigate this, a mix of top-down and bottom-up approaches is needed, balancing national and subnational visions with local realities. The nexus approach is useful in this regard, as it balances interventions at the policy level with more localised actions.

In any case, **incrementalism should be carefully applied. Constant efforts to monitor developments on the ground are needed to plan for increasing the scope and scale of interventions**, while respecting the human rights-based conditionality and ensuring that progressive efforts neither contradict national and subnational interests, nor jeopardise recovery, peace and sustainability.

Embracing an effective localised approach – going local, small and incremental – entails searching for the largest local level in which compromised channels can be avoided or safely negotiated with; competent local actors are present; local needs are structurally addressed while local interests are genuinely represented; national and subnational interests are not undermined; and intermediaries are accessible. Once this optimal level is identified, funds can be parcelled to finance small projects based on the capacities of available local partners.

Proposed roadmap

The roadmap below illustrates a proposed design for local, small and incremental intervention, inspired by a Syrian-owned national vision that complies with a human rights-based conditionality.
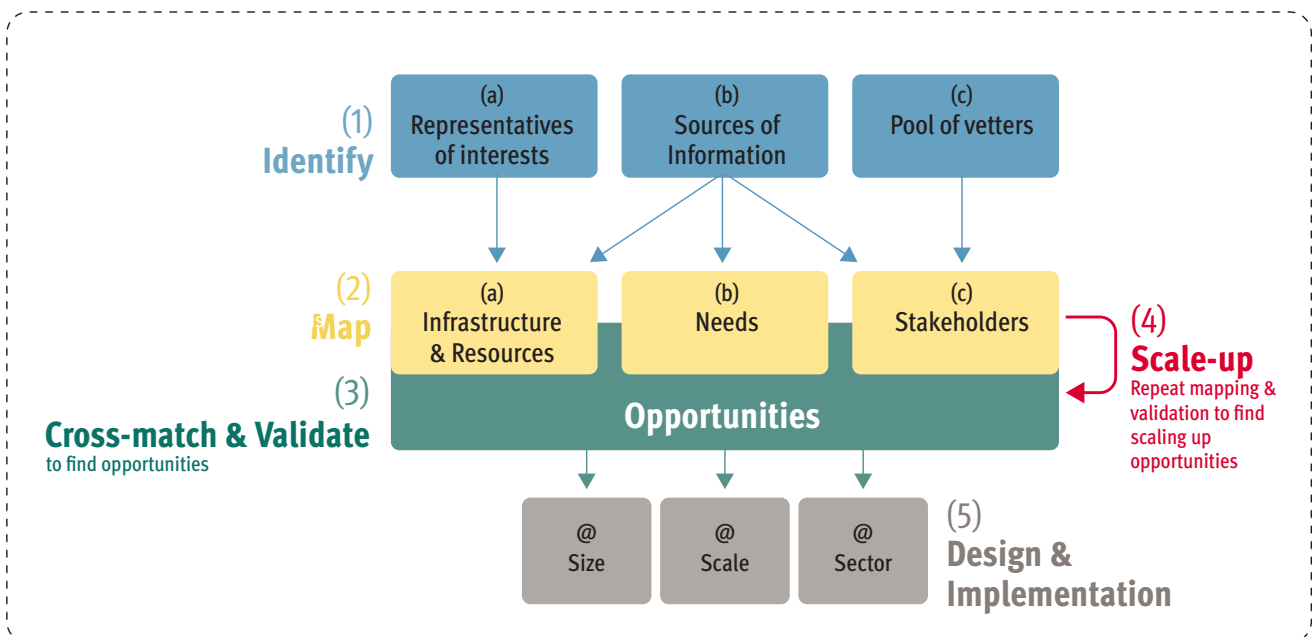
1. **Identification of key actors**

   - Identify reliable and trusted sources of information on the local, subnational and national levels to aid the mapping process.

   - Identify a pool of vetters, including trusted members of local communities as well as relevant professionals and experts.

   - Identify accessible and legitimate representatives of interests at the local, subnational and national levels to assist in decision-making processes.

2. **Mapping of needs and resources**

   - Map stakeholders, including uncompromised civil society actors, competent local governance structures and ethical private sector actors, and vet them for potential engagement.

- Map local needs.
- Map local resources and infrastructure that could serve local interests as well as national and subnational interests.

3. **Cross-matching and validation of opportunities**

- Cross-match the collected information (needs, vetted stakeholders, resources and infrastructures) to identify opportunities for intervention. An opportunity presents itself when needs are matched with the feasibility to operate in a specific area, while respecting the human rights-based conditionality and working within the framework of the identified vision.
- Validate potential opportunities for interventions against local, subnational and national interests.

4. **Design and implementation of interventions**

- Identify the most appropriate scale, size and sector of interventions based on the validated opportunities.
- Implement approved interventions at the relevant scales and budgets, with the vetted actors.

5. **Scale-up**

- Be proactive in trying to create conditions at higher levels and larger scales to:
  - Enlarge the size of projects at the local level when conditions allow (eg, by increasing the number or capacity of partners),
  - Scale up to a higher level when conditions become favourable, and
  - Look for opportunities for cross-fertilisation within and across areas of implementation.

6. **Monitoring**

- Monitor the potential of projects to advance (rather than harm) future regional and national interests in line with the human rights-based conditionality.
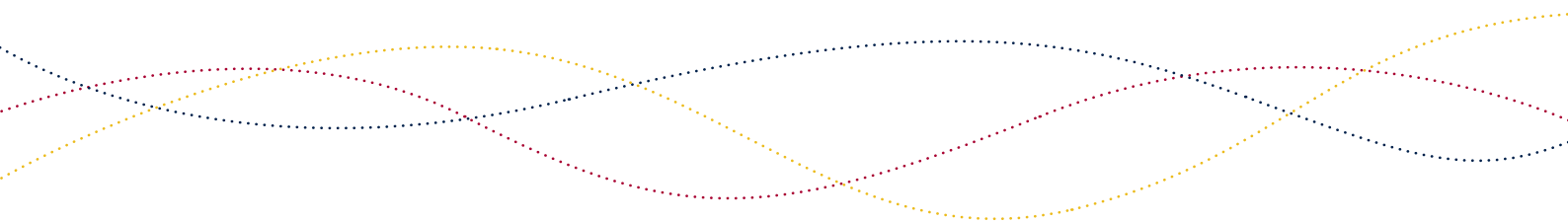
Conclusions

While a localised approach might not be the long-term solution for delivering assistance at scale in Syria, it represents a more strategic approach to work around the current challenges while paving the way for more conventional methods of assistance at scale. The proposed roadmap, which emphasises the need to search for opportunities based on locally identified needs and resources, and national and subnational interests, is an organic approach. Outcomes will continuously change and grow as the context and environment evolves, new legitimate actors emerge, interests shift, state institutions develop, and so on.

This approach must be understood within the wider framework developed by the Syria Resource Group to guide international assistance in Syria. Going local, small and incremental will not work without taking into consideration the policy recommendations developed by the Group on how to avoid compromised channels of aid delivery, work with trusted Syrian intermediaries, engage with the ethical private sector and continuously monitor the work.

The **Syria Resource Group** (SRG) is an independent, multidisciplinary and non-affiliated platform of leading Syrian experts based in the country, closely connected to it, or actively involved from abroad in creative, realistic and principled solutions to Syria's future reconstruction and the international financing of it. The SRG promotes a deliberately Syrian-led approach by providing local-level assessment, generating locally conceived proposals and solutions, and helping shape – rather than merely react to – international aid offerings. The group aims to promote inclusive assistance for the Syrian population, taking into account the diverse demographic, political, economic and security realities of the country. The Institute for Integrated Transitions (IFIT) backs the SRG with operational support and international expertise, helping ensure that the SRG's ideas and vision are effectively promoted and channelled.

Founded in 2012, the Institute for Integrated Transitions (IFIT) is an independent, international, non-governmental organisation offering comprehensive analysis and technical advice to national actors involved in negotiations and transitions in fragile and conflict-affected societies. IFIT has supported negotiations and transitions in countries including Afghanistan, Colombia, El Salvador, Gambia, Libya, Nigeria, Syria, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Tunisia, Ukraine, Venezuela and Zimbabwe.